

FREE LIBRARY COMMISSION

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INFLUENCE OF THE VILLAGE LIBRARY*

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Description of a village.—The "village" is supposed to be a collection of residences and business places too big to be longer classed as a farm, from which it has grown, and too small to be called a city. Its location is away from the business centers, except local interests, and from its central street it stretches away to the detached farm-houses and homes in all directions, often difficult to determine where village ends and farm begins; perhaps, later on, where village ends and city begins. The perplexity is much the same as arises in determining the definite time when the child becomes a youth and the youth a man.

But the average village is presumed to be the center of local interests, where is found the general store,^a postoffice, blacksmith shop, (in front of which all boys have pitched horse shoes),^b the restaurant, yes, and the saloon too. Here it is that the farmers' sons and daughters attend school, and here old and young assemble for the church service. Here it is that the postmaster distributes the mail after he has carefully scanned every letter and conjectured who it is from and the probable contents, and here it is, on the store steps and boxes improvised for seats that the idlers, news-mongers and whittlers sit, seven days in the week, busily discussing personal experiences of their heroic days of youth, the coming circus, the latest horse trade, and the merits and demerits, especially the latter, of every mortal man, woman and child within the range of present or former acquaintances.

Influence from village.—Be it large or small, the village is a center of business and of influence, for good or ill, not alone of its own citizens but for the sweep of surrounding country as well. The limit of many an American boy's travels and of his personal knowledge, beyond his father's yard or farm, is the village such as this. It is here that the impress of early years is made upon more than half of our American youth, male and female, and we all know that later years rarely make radical changes upon the early training. We may modify, improve and develop, but the foundation is still unchanged.

Importance of good influence.—Hence it is that it becomes so important that the influences and impressions necessarily imparted by the village

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be for good instead of bad. If our national experience does not already prove the assertion, I believe the future will prove that it is of vital importance to the perpetuity of our national institutions, and the high plane of intelligent self-government, that this rural and semi-rural population be guided into the foundation paths of honesty, patriotism and philanthropy.

How to introduce library and the results.—Into our village bring the library, and behold the sensation! The idlers and whittlers discuss it from early till late and “wonder if ’twill pay.” The preacher and school-master approve of it, but they “don’t know much about real business principles,” say these wise idlers. The saloon man, with a wise look, affirms that “it is just a waste of good money and won’t find many friends in *this* town.” The result is that all know about it within twenty-four hours, with no expense of advertising. The restaurant man, a rather bright young fellow who has lately “moved in” and whose pedigree and prospects have been thoroughly gone over at the store-step exchange, with an eye to business, offers to care for the library without charge, for the additional trade it will bring him. His residence is in the rear part of the building, where the thrifty wife prepares oyster stews and sandwiches, (and rumor says they live on the scraps), the front room being devoted to serving his customers. In one part of this front room the library is installed, and without expense is distributed to patrons.

The children are quick to understand the rules of the library, secure books and read them. Through their agency the older ones become interested. Scarcely six months have passed before the audience on the store steps has disappeared, leaving the old seeds alone, who bemoan the deadness of the town and wonder “what we are coming to anyhow.” (There are some hopeless cases in every community). Even the saloon man’s customers are somewhat diminished, and recruits from the youth are not satisfactory as to numbers. Just as these haunts are losing, the agencies for good, the school, the church, Sunday observance, courtesy in society, and decency in general, are gaining. In a year the characteristics of the village are changed—imperceptibly, noiselessly, but effectively. Time moves on steadily, the schools are increased, benevolent and literary societies spring up, the tone of conversation is widely different from the former days.

New books have been added from time to time, but five years of library life find the surroundings too limited. The *physical* and the *intellectual* wants of mankind, both of which demand attention, it is now found cannot be cared for under the same management. Enlargement is demanded, for the awakened intellect needs more than the scanty funds of the villagers can supply.

Leads to permanent institution.—At this juncture the man of wealth steps in, who has risen to intelligence and influence in spite of adverse conditions in early life, and thus keenly appreciates the needs of our youth, and erects a solid stone structure of beautiful design, fills it with

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thousands of volumes, and the primitive village library is no more. But can you measure its influence? Do you expect it of me? You must wait until eternity ends to complete your computation.

The seed develops to become the flower -- the kernel to the full ear. So in this enlarged library is absorbed the self-denying labor of those who, in earlier years, struggled without reward of property or praise to initiate the germ that has enlarged to such beautiful perfection. But over the river, many whom they never knew in this life will rise up and call them blessed.

Why village library is especially successful.— Our village here pictured will not apply to all cases. The village in which I associated myself in early life was not of this sort, but it will apply to many that I have known in later years. One of the reasons why the library is so readily accepted in the average village is that the minds of the people are not so intensely absorbed in the passing events as is the case in city life. The exactions of society life, so extremely burdensome under the common conditions existing in a metropolis, are few and simple in the country and village. Few also are the opportunities for gratifying intellectual desires. Hence the field is ready for the seeding and promises a better harvest than if already occupied by either grain or weeds.

Restaurant and games assist in the introduction.— In our imaginary village I did not introduce the restaurant man undesignedly. Many a country youth, big with possibilities, is very timid. The word "library" is new to him and sounds large. It would expose his ignorance, perhaps challenge his manhood, to make the necessary explanations. The same is true of many a wage earner. More than anything else this class fear the ridicule of their associates. In both these cases, and perhaps others, the restaurant enables them to "cover their tracks" and at the same time to determine whether or not the library is really so very awful and dangerous. Then too, some may be unwittingly thus drawn in contact with books, to their future advantage. The social nature of man is successfully approached through the agency of physical gratification; hence the cigar that the traveling salesman ever has ready for you, and the beer that precedes the horse trade. That this social inclination can be utilized, under some circumstances, to aid the introduction and usefulness of the library, I fully believe; and in this my opinion is strengthened by some practical experience. In certain cases it may be advisable to go a step farther and add bowling and billiards, or other games, but be sure that all is done with the ever prominent idea that these are but stepping stones to intellectual development. If a man is going down hill, you must manage some how to stop him before you can change his course upward. Perhaps these agencies will accomplish that much. My judgment is that these measures apply to the primitive library with more force than to the more advanced institutions.

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Importance of libraries.—I beg your indulgence to say a word as to the importance of libraries. Says Phillips Brooks (in effect), "The vessel is in mid-ocean, in the darkness of midnight. The fierce gale lifts it to the crest of the wave—then deep it sinks into the trough of the sea, with towering billows on either side. Will it stand the test—ride out the savage storm? For the answer, look back to the workmen that fashioned and fastened the iron and the oak. Look farther back to the hillsides and valleys where the trees under God's sunshine and rain and sweeping blast matured to soundness and strength. It was there and then that the fate of the ship was determined."

The application comes to every thoughtful mind upon observing the youth. Oftentimes he is thoughtless and careless. The storms and struggles of life are sure to come and test to the limit his endurance and strength in the voyage of life. Can he stand the test? He is deciding the case now, and to the extent of our influence and opportunities we are helping in the decision.

Hell Gate was long a menace to navigation in Long Island Sound. In a moment powerful explosives tore away the great jagged rocks, sheltered though they were by the deep waters of the ocean, and men stood astonished and amazed. But this wonderful work was not really done when the mere child touched the button connecting the electric wires. The skillful engineer, patiently and perseveringly, had long been making the preparation that led to this marvelous result. A failure in his work and the brilliant achievement would never have been recorded.

In these incidents or illustrations it is my desire to bring vividly to our minds the necessity for effective work today, and tomorrow, and unceasingly in the guiding, training and developing of the youth, to enable him to bear the heavy burdens, and to meet the opportunities which will surely be his to bear and to improve.

To accomplish this the library stands out as one of the foremost and most efficient agencies.

In the more personal application of this, let me bring before you the experiences of farmer boy John, for I have some personal knowledge of his case. Far away from the business centers and reached only by the rough country roads over the hills, he performs his plodding labor each day, and at night seeks his lowly home, satisfies his appetite and retires for relief from physical fatigue with much the same satisfaction as does the horse that he has driven during the day. What does he need? He needs to find on the table the library book, in plain type and attractive binding, to stir him, in spite of weariness, to at least examine it. Thus started, his eye falls perchance upon the record of bravery and patriotism of Revolutionary times. Gen. Marion, dining on sweet potatoes and inviting the British officer to the repast, engages his attention until it is fixed in his mind beyond danger of dispossession. Not till the paternal voice calls, "Come John, you must get to bed or you won't be no good to-morrow," does he lay aside the volume, and then with regret. The following day his step is more energetic and manly, as a result of pondering the

previous night's reading. "Thoughts lead to actions—actions to habits." With the reading habit formed, John longs for the evenings and the rainy days, and soon devours every book in the library. Intellectual life is developed and now keeps pace with the rugged physique, a blessing of inestimable value, that ever characterizes the farm boy.

Years go on and John's aroused ambition leads him to the school, the college, where his brawny hands, big feet and broad shoulders, and the natural manners of one of God's true noblemen, is the cause for pity, perhaps the sneer of the city lad; but under his shocky hair an intellect is soon discovered that is close second to his physical power. The tasks and difficulties that swamp the weaker man are John's delight.

Years bring John before us as the president of a railroad system, judge of the supreme court, a willing worker in the dark lands to lift men into light and decent living, or on the platform inspiring others, as only those can who have had personal experience in the problems of life, and in the pathway to honesty, uprightness and worthy citizenship in our country of unparalleled privileges.

In all this John has not lost the tenderness, truthfulness and naturalness of manner that was so thoroughly imbedded in the woof and warp of his life by his early labors and contact with nature and the beauty and the uplift found not elsewhere in the universe.

Without the book that caused the start and that led to the intellectual development, John would retire today, as he did fifty years ago, to rest as his horse rests.

Jennie is the companion of her brother John in all this. At first they read the same books, then she shows a tendency for poetry, and fiction claims some attention. She begins to commit her own thoughts to paper, and some of these productions find their way to the press. Higher development produces an authoress, who stands for the wholesome, the upright and pure life. And the world wonders who the new writer is that can tell so true to life the experiences of youth, understand its perplexities and trials; and make so plain to all the successive steps that lead up to higher activities—to hope and usefulness.

Thus John and Jennie stand before us today, examples of the results that follow the careful and patient preliminary work in which the library was so great a factor. The oak is silent on the hillside as it is matured for the vessel's keel—the engineer without demonstration places the explosives in Hell Gate—so too, the library work is silently done, but the results justify the expression—*sublime*.


Silent forces.—In the days of Elijah, the Lord was not in the earthquake, nor the whirlwind, nor the fire, but in the still small voice. So it has ever been and still is—the greatest forces in the earth are the *silent forces*. The power of gravitation our ears cannot detect, but the earth and the universe are upheld by it. The power of heat and cold come upon the world without demonstration, but what can man, even when aided by

all the wonderful mechanism he has devised, do to withstand their power?

The single book contains the germ which is lodged in the mind of the youth, and by development, without sound of hammer and chisel, becomes a power in the commonwealth, in the nation, in time to the world. Can you measure the influence of Shakespeare, of Lincoln? Homer's songs of 3,000 years ago have ever been an increasing power in the world.

Because the benefits from the library do not at once become discernable to us by demonstration and sound, let us not doubt that we are dealing with the most powerful force known to man, and that results mighty and reaching, infinitely beyond material facts that we can observe, are sure to follow.

We may not develop a Shakespeare or a Homer, but vast multitudes are led away from mere animal environments, up toward the higher plane of happiness, of hope, of well doing, to at least a little foretaste of the real joy that as yet "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard."



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